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SUBJECT: Glacial Melt Forecast Controversy Unlikely to Impact Indian Position on Copenhagen Accord

¶1. (U) Summary: Controversy erupted recently when a leading glacier scientist told the press that the section of the 2007 assessment report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) had misquoted his work. The IPCC report indicted Himalayan glaciers very likely would disappear by 2035. The IPCC has said it will retract this assessment of glacial melt. Several commentators now have questioned the validity and credibility of the IPCC's science. However, India is unlikely to change its position on the Copenhagen Accord as a result of this controversy. End Summary

Background

¶2. (U) The 2007 fourth assessment report of the IPCC indicated that the Himalayan glaciers could shrink from the present 500,000 sq km to 100,000 sq km by 2035. This assessment was attributed to statements made in 1999 by leading glaciologist Dr. Syed Iqbal Husnain, who was then a professor in the Centre for Environmental Studies in New Delhi's Jawaharlal Nehru University and Chairperson of the International Commission on Snow and Ice. Based on Husnain's interviews with "New Scientists" and "Down to Earth" magazines, World Wildlife Fund (WWF) India in 2005 published a report on Himalayan glaciers that stated "if the present rate [of melt] continues, the likelihood of them disappearing by the year 2035 is very high." The WWF report, in turn, was used as a basis for the IPCC's Working Group II report on Himalayan glacial melt. Controversy erupted when Dr. Husnain recently told the media that his 1999 statements had been misquoted and the Himalayan glaciers will not disappear by 2035.

¶3. (U) WWF India has now conceded its 2005 report "contained erroneous information." A WWF India contact acknowledged to ESTOFF that parts of its report were anecdotal and drawn from popular articles rather than peer-reviewed scientific articles. IPCC Chairman Dr. R.K. Pachauri, who received the Nobel Prize on behalf of the IPCC, and who also serves as Director-General of The Energy and Resources Institute (TERI) working on environment and energy issues, has stated that the IPCC will retract its assessment on the glaciers.

Expect Ongoing Debates on Climate Change Impacts

¶4. (U) The controversy has provided ammunition to those who allege the IPCC's science is "speculative" and its peer review processes are unreliable. It has been a blow to the credibility of Dr. Pachauri, who also has been under fire for exploiting his IPCC position for personal gain, a charge he vigorously has denied. Several commentators have cited the glacier issue to support arguments that India "should not rush into" climate change commitments. The leading business daily Mint, in a January 19 article entitled "Voodoo Science, Voodoo Policy," claimed that when "scientists get enmeshed in political agendas" the search for truth is left behind.

15. (U) Nonetheless, there is little support for ignoring the conclusions of the IPCC Working Group II report, even if some parts of it are recognized to be flawed. Although there is considerable disagreement about impacts and timing of climate change, there are few voices in the Indian debate denying anthropogenic causes of global warming. Most climate change scientists and advocates here agree that there is a need for greater study of the Himalayan glaciers and that concluding results for the entire Himalayan range based on partial assessments would be a mistake.

Little Impact on the India's Copenhagen Accord Commitments

16. (U) The controversy over the Himalayan glacier melt and its link to climate change notwithstanding, the Government of India appears unlikely to change its position on the Copenhagen Accord. While the GOI views the Himalayan region as a fragile area and has included the Himalayan ecosystem in its National Action Plan on Climate Change, India's climate change positions were not directly linked to the IPCC glacier melt forecast. Indeed, MOEF consistently has claimed there is insufficient scientific evidence to prove climate change is the cause of glacial melt in India. Releasing a November 2009 MOEF report on the Himalayan glaciers in India, MOEF minister Jairam Ramesh acknowledged that the glaciers are in a poor state of health, but insisted that statements on disappearing glaciers were "sweeping" and "alarmist." Dr. Pachauri, among others at the time, criticized Ramesh's assertion that it is premature to conclude that the Himalayan glaciers are retreating abnormally because of global warming.

17. COMMENT: (U) Ramesh, relishing the opportunity to say "I told you so," has continued to call for policies to be backed by scientific facts. However, neither he nor any other GOI official has made any

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statement indicating a need to reassess India's commitments under the Copenhagen Accord or questioning the fundamental premises of climate change science.

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